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ABSTRACT

In addition to writing short stories, poems, and plays, seniors enrolled in a creative writing course in a New York high school compose and illustrate children's stories. They first become familiar with published works of children's literature so that they can learn to identify and appreciate story devices used by professional writers. As the students begin writing and illustrating their stories, improving the process rather than correcting the product is emphasized. When the stories are completed, volunteers learn storytelling techniques with which to tell their stoires: they may divide their plots into separate units of action and practice them in sequence; they may identify sections of their stories that should be memorized; they may practice up to twice a day for at least a week; and they may monitor their storytelling progress with tape recordings, with modification of their presentation based on thoughtful analysis. They then present their stories to preschool children participating in the school district's Child and Family Program. The benefits of meshing the creative writing unit with storytelling activities include the enjoyment of writing and "telling" stories, the positive reading experiences for children, and the development of a warm and loving relationship between the seniors and the children. Future plans for this program include extending the storytelling to the elementary school and to pediatric sections of local hospitals. (HTH)

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Creative Writing and Storytelling: A Bridge from High School to Preschool

by Joseph Sanacore

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In the language arts field, the areas of creative writing and storytelling have much in common. Although these areas reflect distinct processes, they can complement each other if they are synthesized appropriately. Such a synthesis has taken place at the Hauppauge School District, where seniors who enroll in the elective course Creative Writing can engage in the writing and "telling" of children's stories.

Writing

Typically, these seniors experience the kinds of writing one would expect in a course titled Creative Writing. They compose short stories, poems, and plays, and some students even complete novellas. In addition, they prepare manuscripts, select markets, and develop markets; these and other activities are stimulated by the teacher and by resources, such as Writing Creatively (Berbrich, 1977).

A unique aspect of Creative Writing is a unit on composing and illustrating children's stories. Before seniors begin writing the stories, they immerse themselves in published works of children's literature. This exposure helps them to identify and appreciate story devices used by professional writers; some of these devices also have value for effective storytelling. For example, much alliteration in Kipling's Just So Stories (1972) provides opportunities for children to get involved in storytelling activities. Similarly, longer repeated refrains in Slobodkina's Caps for Sale (1947) and incremental refrains in Raskin's Ghost in a Four Room Apartment (1969) entice children to participate in storytelling (Stewig, 1978). Thus, as seniors read a wide variety of children's literature, they focus on ways of improving their own creative writing and on devices for involving children during future storytelling.

These experiences provide a sound foundation for writing children's literature. As students begin writing and illustrating their stories, the teacher offers praise, provides suggestions for improvement, and encourages students to share ideas. Thus, the instructional emphasis is on improving the process rather than on correcting the product. This approach is successful, and it reinforces the contention that teacher intervention is an important part of improving the writing and illustrating of children's stories.

Storytelling

When the stories are completed, Creative Writing volunteers learn storytelling techniques. According to Farnsworth (1981), a major prerequisite to effective storytelling is liking the story one plans to tell. "Any misgivings or reservations you have about the story will be communicated to your listeners. So feeling that it is 'your' story comes first" (p. 164). Farnsworth's concern is well-received and fits nicely in the context of the course uni , since students who volunteer to "tell" their stories are, in fact, the authors of these stories. This outcome increases the chances of liking the stories and of communicating this feeling to children.

With this outcome established, seniors learn and practice a variety of techniques. Although comprehensive sources on storytelling are available, Stewig (1978) offers excellent suggestions for teachers that are adapted easily for students. These adaptations at the Hauppauge School District are as follows:

1. Students divide their plots into separate units of action, and they practice them in sequence. "This does not mean memorizing the story word for word, but rather learning the sequence necessary to moving the story ahead" (p. 340).

2. Students identify sections of their stories that should be memorized. For example, a repeated refrain that contributes significantly to the mood of a story should be committed to memory and be incorporated into the storytelling.

3. Students develop fluency by practicing about twice a day for at least a week. During these practice sessions, storytellers blend the memorized sections with the sequenced units of action. Becoming accustomed to the sounds of their voices during storytelling is necessary; students therefore rehearse in a comfortable environment, for example, with friends, with parents, or in front of a mirror.

4. Students monitor their progress by tape recording the "telling" of their stories. To assure objectivity during the evaluation of their oral presentations, they wait several days before they listen to the tape recordings. Then, thoughtful analysis focuses on achieving greater fluency, modifying aspects of the stories to generate more effectiveness, choosing different words to inspire mood clarity, and changing paralinguistic elements (pause, tempo, pitch, etc.).

5. Students change aspects of their presentations, based on their thoughtful analysis. They also continue to practice their storytelling until they are finally ready to share their stories with children!

The storytelling environment at the Hauppauge School District is unique, since the children are three and four years of age and attend the District's Child and Family program. This program is sponsored by the home economics department, and it is offered in the Hauppauge High School. Home economics students work with the children and gain concrete insights concerning the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development of the children. The preschoolers also derive benefits by being exposed to a variety of activities, including listening to and participating in storytelling. As the Creative Writing seniors "tell" their stories, the home economics students observe the children's behavior. Some of these activities are video taped so that the seniors can view their strengths and weaknesses as storytellers. In addition, future students of Creative Writing can view the video tapes and thus experience vicariously the excitement and challenge of working creatively with preschoolers. These viewing experiences also help new students to improve their own storytelling techniques. Some video tapes appear on local cable channels, enabling the Hauppauge community to observe and respond to warm, creative happenings in the District.

Benefits

The benefits of meshing the Creative Writing unit with the storytelling activities are numerous. These benefits include:

1. Seniors enjoy writing and "telling" stories, and they also gain useful insights about related careers, such as public librarian, school library media specialist, writer/illustrator of children's books, and free-lance storyteller.

2. Children become excited about book language and about story events. These experiences build a background of knowledge and create a desire to read.

3. Creative storytelling also provides opportunities to involve children. For example, motivating children to help "tell" the stories and encouraging children to use gestures concerning the stories are examples of creative involvement. This active participation reflects a more satisfying experience than passive listening to stories; it also serves as an introduction to creative drama (Stewig, 1973; Stewig, 1978).

4. The relationship between the seniors and the preschoolers reflects genuine warmth and love. This relationship seems to provide the children with a positive introduction to school, and it appears to provide the seniors with a realistic perspective of children as language users and appreciators.

5. Copies of the children's stories are placed in the library media center. They are available for parents who plan to use them with their children, for children who can use them independently, and for seniors who enroll in Creative Writing. Similarly, the video tapes of storytelling are available for parents' and students' viewing.

6. The interdisciplinary and interage activities generate positive public relations.

Summary

Thus far, the Creative Writing unit and the storytelling activities represent a rewarding bridge from the high school to the preschool levels. Seniors and preschoolers benefit from their creative involvement, and educators gain useful insights about the importance of language stimulation for young children. Future plans include extending the storytelling to the elementary schools of the Hauppauge School District and also to the pediatrics sections of local hospitals.

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